

The Possibilities of Play: How to Combat the Creativity Crisis

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With the looming threat of Artificial Intelligence and ChatGPT on the horizon, we need to prioritize play now more than ever. The collective imagination of children is waning, and we have a responsibility to protect their innocence and champion their childhood as much as possible. The current creativity crisis plagues children and adults of all ages

and if we don't create the conditions to dream, learn, and grow through play, future generations will suffer, along with the entirety of our field as educators.

Placing blame on the numbing power of social media and screens is easy, but futile and offers little by way of exercising our authority as educators to commit to play-based practices throughout the school day for our children and the adults who serve them. Play during the school day is not just for recess, but that is an excellent place to start and to even expand into the upper grades.

To make the best of an intolerable situation of waiting for buses last year, we took kids outside and I am not sure I have seen that level of excitement from sixth graders in a long time. Running around and getting fresh air negated their exhaustion and frustration from a long school day. Albert Einstein reminds us "play is the highest form of research" and yet, we continue to omit play-based activities from the school day or hastily remove play as a "consequence" for something innocuous or out of a child's control.

Imagine if as an adult, the daily expectation included arrival at work, sitting in a designated area and quietly completing a task (deemed as "morning work" or a "bell ringer"). Then, a consequence of not completing the "morning work," is to give up your lunch and plan time to finish the work. Sounds tortuous, doesn't it? That's because it is, and yet, we continue to deprive children of time to dream and connect with peers because we think that "morning work" is somehow going to foster critical thinking or assist in the mastery of a skill. Some educators assign "morning work" to control and manage children as soon as they walk in the schoolhouse door. Regardless of the intent, "morning work" is not the ideal way to start a day, regardless of age or position in society.

Reminded in a seminal piece by Fred Rogers and Hedda Sharapan (1983):

"Most people have a sense that "play" is appropriate for children and "work" is appropriate for adults. Over the

years, I have come to think of play in a way that makes it a very serious matter, indeed. I think play is an expression of our creativity; and creativity, I believe, is at the very root of our ability to learn, to cope, and to become whatever we may be."

Isn't play the "work" of children?

The Price of Homework

Not only are children denied the opportunity to imagine and socialize as they start their day, but they also continue to suffer access to creative endeavors throughout the day, especially if they don't complete their homework. Additionally, philosophical discourse regarding homework is lacking in teacher preparation programs, so educators typically avoid questioning already existing policies or explore their own practices (Bempechat et al., 2023).

This isn't a manifesto against the inequities of homework, per se, but more so, a plea to truly reflect on the purpose and desired outcome of assigned homework before "punishing" a child by taking away playtime when incomplete. There are plenty of reasons a child doesn't do their homework, and they are rarely born from defiance; access to human or technological resources, learning style or inability to understand the task, family responsibilities such as taking care of siblings or elders, mental health issues, or an over-extended activity schedule.

Pros of Play

Play gives everyone a chance to process their feelings (especially related to trauma or violence), problem solve, connect with others, explore interests, and make sense of the world around them. Sustainable (daily) play builds imaginative endurance to combat screens and information overload. Early arbiters of play made the connection between experimentation and inquiry (Dewey, 1910), which supports the idea of play as research. Vygotsky (1978) supported play to foster child development through speech, cognitive processing and self-awareness. According to neuroscientists, the prefrontal cortex of the brain, impacted by play and the production of a protein, is responsible for the growth of new neurons and synapses (Gordon et al., 2003). Additionally, sensory benefits abound from play-based activities.

Guided play has a place in all content areas, including games, maker activities and theatre-based experiences (especially ones with puppets or props). Some things to keep in mind when "guiding" play is an explicit learning

outcome for the educator facilitating the play-based activity, ensuring the play is child-centered through choice and freedom as much as possible, and flexibility is a must in terms of guiding the play through prompts, open-ended questioning, and modeling to gauge a child’s response to the activity and any sensitivities that arise (Skene et al, 2022). Play also primes children and adults for learning, critical thinking, and collaboration.

Not Just for Kids

Play can happen in many forms, and if introduced and fostered at an early age, should continue into adulthood, although it might look a little different. Sure, adults have opportunities to play sports and participate in theatre productions outside of the workday but play also embodies our daily interactions with each other as we banter, brainstorm, and laugh about the cute and silly things children say and do.

When encouraged and modeled, workplace fun can enhance employee creativity and ideally lead to innovative ideas and practices to better the entire organization. *Workplace fun*, defined as “playful social, interpersonal, recreational, or task activities intended to provide amusement, enjoyment, or pleasure” (Yang, 2020), is also worth considering as we contend with educator attrition and retention. Our roles as educators are incredibly stressful, but promoting workplace fun through organic social interactions and time to laugh can make a world of difference for everyone, especially the children we serve.

The Playful School

Ideas to inspire a playful school:

- Allow time in the schedule for free or guided play at all grade levels. Recess isn’t just for elementary children. Advisory or club time in the upper grades provides opportunities for student-driven activities based on personal interests or time for socialization through board and card games, STEAM projects, low-stakes sports games like kickball and interacting with nature.
- Be careful about micromanaging play-based activities for children; we shouldn’t impose our own understanding of experiences or objects, but rather allow them the freedom and space to explore their own perceptions of the world (gender constructs, family structures, the intended use of objects). Aside from physical aggression, there are no wrong answers.
- Don’t be afraid to play alongside, model fun and be silly with kids and colleagues. Last year, I had the pleasure of supervising some fifth-grade students after the PSSA, and I was thrilled when they asked me to play “store” with them. Little did I know, they had a whole arrangement with fidget toys and

“shopping” at each other’s establishments. Little did *they* know, they were learning through a blending of various content areas, with endless possibilities for play, such as:

- **Math:** They priced items and determined how to budget their play money.
- **Literacy:** They made signs and descriptions of the items for sale, along with advertisements for customers.
- **Cultural responsiveness:** They discussed different items and explained their use to our English Language Learning friends.
- **Inclusion:** The application of universal design for children with ADHD/Anxiety since they were manipulating the fidgets the whole time and pitched their benefits to potential customers.
- **STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics):** They designed and made their own fidget products to sell.
- **PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports):** The teacher embraced the idea of them using the PBIS tickets in a token-economy fashion to make real-world connections.
- **Civics:** They discussed the impact of past and current events on prices and the disparities that exist for people regarding access to goods or services. An organic conversation about “fair” prices took place.

- Multiple countries have adopted policies related to play. This is worth considering ensuring we protect and champion playtime for our learners. Below is an example from the Canadian Public Health Association (2019):

Learning Objectives:

- Identify the purpose and applications of a play policy.
- Understand the role of parents and caregivers, schools and municipalities in providing high quality, challenging play opportunities.
- Understand the need for guiding principles and a collaborative decision-making process in the development of a play policy.
- Identify the key components of a best practice play policy.

Learning Outcome:

- Demonstrate an understanding of play policies that can be applied to an organizational context, in order to collaboratively prepare and implement an effective play policy.
- Play is an equity issue. It is important to understand not all children have access or encouragement to play outside of the school day. Some children have toys and others do not. Some children care for other family members and others do not. Some children spend an excessive amount of time on screens and others do not. Consider this to reexamine “show and tell” or to institute policies related to bringing in toys from home.
- To remove or withhold play experiences and assign a “punishment” for a whole group due to the negative behavior of one or a few is not human-centered or ever appropriate. Entire classes should not miss recess or activities unless there is definitive proof that every child failed to meet the stated expectation. Again, imagine the frustration of this as an adult.
- Encourage a minimalist approach to learning spaces to allow for physical play and more opportunities for children to imagine possibilities of nondescript objects, blocks, boxes, plain socks or bags for puppets.
- Reflect on the espoused purpose of homework or “morning work” and provide children with a more joyful and creative start to their day. Think about better ways to support children who don’t do homework before taking away their play. Provide access to LEGO bricks, brain flakes, or clay as children enter the room, since these activities also support fine motor skill development and remember, there is no such thing as “too old” for LEGO.
- Commit to a trauma-informed approach to any and all decision-making and as a lens to create a sense of belonging for everyone in the school; Fear and anxiety inhibit a playful mindset.
- Consider how to embed play-based activities into various content areas, such as hopping out syllables, maker projects, and theatre-based activities.

- Define your idea of “Workplace fun” and find ways to integrate it into your day. Remember, not everyone likes pranks, so make sure the “fun” isn’t at the expense of others.

Conclusion

We have tremendous power to inspire creativity for others and play is an optimal pathway to do just that. While I am hopeful to continue to explore instructional practices to include play and project-based activities, we should also hold recess and free play as sacrosanct. Many of us cherished our playtime as kids, and everyone should get those same experiences, adults included!

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